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VAMPIRES HAVE UNDERGONE A TRANSFORMATION FROM VILLAINS TO VICTIMS

DAYTON, Ohio — Dracula has lost his bite.

Vampires are no longer simply symbols of evil, says Jim Farrelly, professor of English at the University of Dayton. "Vampires have been reshaped over the last century to be an object of pity." Even children who dress up as vampires on Halloween like to see themselves as scary — not wicked, he says.

In a popular "Literature of the Occult" class that Farrelly teaches at UD each year, Stephen King's 'Salem's Lot is required reading — resulting in lengthy class discussions about vampire lore.

To get the discussion started, Farrelly usually tells the campus legend of UD's "real-life" vampire who was said to have appeared in the dark shadows of the Roesch Library bookshelves. Farrelly says he dismissed the legend until a man, dressed in black with protruding fangs and a pale ashen face, appeared at Farrelly's office asking him to critique a story that he had written for a writing contest. The "son of Dracula" did no harm, but the story can still frighten, Farrelly says.

What is it about vampires that make the fictional characters so intriguing? One explanation might be that "vampires represent our own guilt about our inability to control our own desires," according to Farrelly.

"When people are consumed by sin, they feel enormous guilt," Farrelly says. "The vampire has a license to do all the things they can't do."

A modern vampire, like the one portrayed by Gary Oldman in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 Dracula, "is someone who fully indulges his sexual appetite and can escape moral codes and restrictions," Farrelly says.

However, the first Dracula was not so complicated. Bram Stoker's 1897 Dracula novel is said to be based on a historical character known as Vlad the Impaler, the second son of Prince...
Vlad Dracul, who ruled in present-day Romania. Vlad the Impaler claimed the throne in 1456 and ruled for six years, but his victims are estimated at 40,000. He is said to have invited the local nobles, whom he blamed for his father’s death, and their families for an Easter meal at the palace. After dinner he impaled the older guests and the rest were forced to build his castle. Once finished, he impaled those still living.

Female vampires may get their roots from Elizabeth Bathory, a Hungarian countess who lived in the late 1500s, Farrelly says. Her tyranny began when she was left in control of disciplining the castle’s household staff. In addition to inhumane torture, she was said to have bathed in blood to improve her skin’s elasticity and smoothness.

Farrelly says the first fictional vampires, such as the one portrayed by Bela Lugosi in the 1931 Dracula film, followed the historical model as powerful figures of evil. Gradually the character changed. In 1979, Dracula was portrayed by Frank Langella as a handsome man, and then in the 1994 adaptation of Anne Rice’s Interview With A Vampire, the character was transformed into a sexual figure who is trying to control his urges.

“What started as real people, tyrants, now suddenly are seen as people who are trapped,” Farrelly says. “The themes of good and evil have changed to affection, love and pity. There’s a willingness to go to a vampire movie and not see the vampire as an object of evil.”

Farrelly says the efforts to humanize the vampire have succeeded. “That’s why young children love to dress up as vampires for Halloween,” Farrelly says. “The vampire has a hypnotic power and is not just an object of hate.”

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